Bingham Hall

The Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina named this building in 1929 to honor Robert Hall Bingham, class of 1857. The building originally housed the university’s School of Commerce and was later home to the Department of English and the Department of Speech (now Communication).

Bingham:

- Lobbied for increased public investments in education and played a significant supporting role in elevating UNC’s stature in the early twentieth century
- Promoted racial Anglo-Saxonism, a blood-and-soil strain of white supremacist ideology
- Educated generations of white men to celebrate racist violence as a civilizing force and instrument of order – social, economic, and political – both at home and on a global scale

Robert Hall Bingham was born in Hillsborough in 1838, the fourth child of William J. and Elizabeth N. Bingham. He graduated from UNC with first honors in 1857, served as a captain in the Confederate army, and for nearly a year was held as a military prisoner by United States forces. After the Civil War, Bingham made a distinguished career as an educator. He taught at the private academy for boys that his grandfather had founded in 1793, took the helm as its headmaster in 1873, reformed its military curriculum, and in 1891 moved what was by then known as the Bingham School to Asheville, where it remained in operation until shortly after his death in 1927.

The school was widely admired as one of the best of its kind in the South. That reputation gave Bingham standing to lobby, in Raleigh and in Washington, for increased expenditures on public education and establishment of both the North Carolina College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (now North Carolina State University) and the North Carolina State Normal and Industrial School, a teachers college for white women (now

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1 "Bingham Hall," Alumni Review 17 (April 1929), 199; Minutes, June 11, 1928, oversize volume 13, Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina Records, 1789-1932, #40001, University Archives, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The trustees’ minutes include no explanation of the decision to name the building for Bingham.

the University of North Carolina at Greensboro). Racial concerns were never far removed from this advocacy. In 1884, for example, Bingham campaigned for federal aid to education as a matter of justice for southern whites, who after Emancipation, he said, were burdened with the responsibility of educating former slaves and their children. "We of the South," he argued, "are paying the heaviest war tax in proportion to our means which a people ever paid, to educate the children of another race, for whose presence among us we are not responsible, who were thrust into our citizenship without our consent, and for whose education we are doing so much, that when our children cry to us for bread we have to give them a stone."3

Bingham was also a dedicated UNC alumnus. He made his most significant contribution to the university when he helped to establish the Kenan Professorship Fund. In November 1916, his son, Robert W. Bingham, a lawyer and later a newspaper publisher in Louisville, Kentucky, married Mary Lily Kenan Flagler. Mary Lily was the daughter of William Rand Kenan – an influential businessman and political figure in Wilmington, who also served as a university trustee – and the widow of Henry M. Flagler, a cofounder of the Standard Oil Company with John D. Rockefeller and, at the turn of the century, the leading developer of Florida east-coast real estate. The Binghams, father and son, encouraged Mary Lily to specify in her will that the professorship fund be endowed with a portion of the $100 million fortune she inherited from Flagler. She complied, and then died suddenly in July 1917. When a lengthy legal battle over her estate was finally resolved five years later, UNC received a windfall that would transform the institution. The Kenan fund paid an annual dividend of $75,000, a figure that in early years exceeded the value of the university's entire faculty payroll. The money helped to elevate UNC to the upper ranks of American higher education. It "placed the university in the enviable position of being able to establish a number of distinguished professorships," one contemporary explained, "and to compete successfully in the national market for scholars of note."4

3 Steelman, "Robert Bingham," 158; Robert Bingham, reprint, The New South: An Address Delivered by Maj. Robert Bingham, of Bingham School, N.C., in the Interest of National Aid to Education, February 15, 1884, and July 16, 1884, 16, North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. On the history and standing of the Bingham School, see also The Successful Training of Southern Youths for More than a Century, reprinted from the News and Observer (Raleigh, N.C.), 1905, North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The newspaper’s feature story noted that the Bingham School enjoyed a reputation that was "equaled by but few institutions of learning of any grade in the United States, and approached by no other school in the South." U.S. Army officials regarded the Bingham School "as one of the four or five military institutions of first rank in the country." See Ashe, "Robert Bingham," 85.

Robert the elder was a white supremacist to the core. There is good reason to believe that like his older brother, William, he belonged to the Reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan. William was arrested in 1870, when Governor William W. Holden mobilized the state militia under the command of George W. Kirk to suppress Klan violence in Alamance and Caswell Counties. There, nightriders had lynched Wyatt Outlaw, a Black constable and town commissioner, and assassinated state senator John W. Stephens, a white Republican. Robert was not among the Klansmen rounded up and jailed, but he appears to have taken pride in the fact that he, too, "was hunted with blood hounds by Kirk's raiders." His namesake son disclosed that family lore in an admiring letter written in 1937 to Margaret Mitchell, author of Gone with the Wind. The younger Bingham also shared a vividly frightful childhood story. "My earliest memory," he recalled, "is of clutching my mother's skirts in terror at a hooded apparition, and having my father raise his mask to relieve me. Then he went out in command of the Ku Klux in our district."5

The cruelty of white men's determination to rule marked Robert Bingham for life. As an educator and influential public figure, he advocated the doctrine of racial Anglo-Saxonism, a blood-and-soil strain of white supremacist ideology advanced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by British and American intellectuals. It was a mythical concoction that glorified "race war" as the driving force of civilization; it excused the violent destruction of indigenous societies on a global scale and sanctified white dominion over all the peoples of the world as the dictate of Nature and the will of God.6

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5 Robert W. Bingham to Margaret Mitchell, February 16, 1937, Box 18, Robert Worth Bingham Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Ellis, Robert Worth Bingham and the Southern Mystique, 6-7. William Bingham appears in accounts of the Klan arrests that were submitted as evidence in the impeachment trial of Governor Holden. See Trial of William W. Holden, Governor of North Carolina, Before the Senate of North Carolina, On Impeachment by the House of Representatives, for High Crimes and Misdemeanors, vol. 1 (Raleigh: Sentinel Printing Company, 1871), 9, 584-608. See also vol. 3, 2277, 2294, 2538. Robert W. Bingham was born in 1871, a year after Governor Holden's effort to suppress the Klan. His memory of his father in a Klansman's hood, therefore, comes from later in the decade. Eleanor Bingham Miller (interviewed on October 22, 2020) reports that stories of Robert the elder's role as a Klan leader have been passed down through generations of Bingham family lore.

In Bingham’s time, such thinking found expression in scholarship, politics, and popular culture alike. Woodrow Wilson's five-volume *History of the American People* was a publishing sensation in 1902. In its pages, Wilson—who held a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University and occupied the president's office at Princeton—praised the Anglo-Saxon virtues of the white settler colonies that, over the course of three centuries, spread inexorably, and with deadly consequence, across the North American continent. One of his graduate school colleagues, a North Carolinian named Thomas F. Dixon Jr., lifted up the same white nationalist ideals in a series of novels—*The Leopard's Spots* (1902), *The Clansman* (1905), and *The Traitor* (1907)—that celebrated Ku Klux Klan violence in the post-Civil War years. With Dixon's assistance, movie director D.W. Griffith, turned those works into the 1915 blockbuster, "The Birth of a Nation." Wilson, now resident in the White House, so admired the film that he had it screened for members of his cabinet. It was, he said, "like writing history with lightning." Wilson embraced Dixon and Griffith because they championed the white supremacist values that defined his presidency as the most racially repressive since the end of Reconstruction. He had already used his executive authority to impose Jim Crow segregation on the federal bureaucracy in Washington, D.C., and in the aftermath of World War I, would promote a peace that rejected colonized people's demands for democracy and self-determination. A century later, in June 2020, Princeton officials concluded that Wilson's record of "racist thinking and policies" was so repugnant that his name should be removed from one of the university’s residential colleges and its acclaimed school of public and international affairs.⁷

Bingham laid out his own conception of racial Anglo-Saxonism most elaborately in "An Ex-Slaveholder's View of the Negro Question in the South," an essay he published in July 1900.

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⁸ On the eve of the Civil War, Robert lived with his parents, William and Elizabeth, who enslaved fourteen people: four women, four men, four girls, and two boys. See 1860 U.S. Federal Census, Slave Schedules, Orange County, North Carolina, Ancestry.com. We have a vivid account of William's use of violence to enforce the mastery of white over Black. It comes from Elizabeth Keckley, who published her autobiography in 1868. In the late 1830s, Robert Burwell, a Presbyterian minister, moved to Hillsborough to take charge of a local church. He brought young Keckley along as a house servant. Bingham's parents were members of Burwell's congregation, and his father visited the parsonage often. At the request of Burwell's wife, William set out to break Keckley's "stubborn pride." Keckley wrote at length about the beatings she received from Bingham, whom she described as a "cruel, hard man." In the first instance, Bingham led her into an empty room, shut the door, "and in his blunt way remarked:
in the European edition of Harper's Monthly Magazine and circulated widely among newspaper editors, politicians, and civic leaders across the South. With other true believers, he contended that modern white men had inherited from ancient Teutonic (German) tribes a fierce warrior spirit and passion for liberty. The tale of that heritage began with the fall of the Roman Empire. "What our race-history was in prehistoric times we can only guess at," Bingham wrote, "but History teaches us that the Roman, who subjugated and absorbed so many other races, failed in all his attempts on the Teuton . . . And History [also] teaches very clearly that the race characteristics of the Angles and the Saxons are more distinct and more permanent than those of any other of [the] Teutonic tribes who overwhelmed the Roman Empire. The other Teutonic invaders of Sothern and Western Europe lost their language and race identity and were themselves absorbed by their subjects." But not the "Angles and Saxons," who landed in the British Isles in the mid fifth century. There, they went about "exterminating the Celt." In doing so, Bingham explained, they "changed Britain to Angle-land, and it has been England ever since."9

Over the next 1,300 years, white men soaked the soil of Britain and North America with blood as they struggled for individual liberty and self-government. The Magna Carta, the Church of England, and the Declaration of Independence – "every step towards the highest freedom was won in the best blood of our race," Bingham wrote. And as white men carried the purported blessings of liberty around the globe, even more blood flowed. "Anglo-Americans" encountered "the Red Man," Bingham noted, "and the Red man vanished away." A similar fate befell the aboriginal peoples of Australia; on the Indian sub-continent, the British ruled tens of millions of dark-skinned imperial subjects; and in Cuba, Hawaii, and the Philippines, the United Sates asserted its dominion over the "Brown men and Yellow men" of the Caribbean and the Pacific, thousands of whom "perished under the methods of 'benevolent assimilation' practiced there."10

Lizzie, I am going to flog you . . . so take down your dress this instant." "Recollect," Keckley advised her readers, "I was eighteen years of age, was a woman fully developed, and yet this man coolly bade me take down my dress. I drew myself up proudly, firmly, and said: 'No, Mr. Bingham, I shall not take down my dress before you. Moreover, you shall not whip me unless you prove the stronger.'" That defiance infuriated Bingham. "He seized a rope," Keckley recalled, "and after a hard struggle succeeded in binding my hands and tearing my dress from my back." Then, with the "steady hand and practiced eye" of a schoolmaster who was skilled in corporal punishment, he whipped her mercilessly with a rawhide. "It cut the skin, raised great welts," and sent "warm blood" trickling down Keckley's back, but she stood her ground: "I was too proud to let my tormentor know what I was suffering. I closed my lips firmly, that not even a groan might escape from them, and I stood like a statue while the keen lash cut deep into my flesh." Two more beatings followed. See Keckley, Behind the Scenes (New York: G. W. Carleton and Company, 1868).


Bingham surveyed these conquests approvingly, and declared, "We are Teutons, God's kings of men."\(^{11}\)

By Bingham's account, only "the Black man" of Africa, enslaved in the American South, had escaped the misfortune of other "colored races." There, munificent slaveholders Christianized the "savage" and "developed [him] in the arts of civilization." But that work was soon undone. Sentimental abolitionists in the North persuaded themselves that the slave was "an Anglo-Saxon in a black skin," Bingham declared, and on that basis drove the American republic to war with itself. Then came what he described as the "horrors of Reconstruction." White radicals in the North and race traitors in the South granted former slaves political and social equality with men who had formerly been their masters. It was, Bingham remarked, "the first time since the beginning of time that a white race undertook to put the feet of a colored race on the necks of the men and women of their own blood and breed."\(^{12}\)

In Bingham's view, the consequences were dire: cut free from slavery's discipline, Blacks retrogressed toward barbarism. "We delivered the African man over to the nation in 1865 orderly, fairly industrious, without vices, without disease, without crime," Bingham wrote. Then, "in the hands of the nation he became disorderly, idle, vicious, diseased; three times more criminal than the native white and one and a half times more criminal that the foreign white consisting largely of the scum of Europe." Worst of all, Bingham claimed, emancipation unleashed Black men's bestial sexuality, resulting in a supposed epidemic of rape, which whites answered with the blood lust of lynching. That made Blacks doubly guilty, first for the crime, and second for drawing out the savage within white men, dragging them down into lawlessness and compelling them to brutalize themselves by dispensing the rough justice of the mob.\(^{13}\)

These beliefs placed Bingham squarely within the ranks of thinkers described by historian Joel Williamson as "Radical racists" – whites who were "ready for a vengeance that matched the cruelty suffered in slavery." Radicals "offered up an immediate and great crisis, requiring quick, dramatic, and valiant action." The effect was "electric," Williamson observed, particularly for young men like those who were educated in the military curriculum at Bingham's school. They grew up with tales of Confederate valor but had "no chance at war" themselves. The struggle for white supremacy relieved their longing. It offered an opportunity

\(^{11}\) Bingham, "Ex-Slaveholder's View," S.

\(^{12}\) Bingham, "Ex-Slaveholder's View," S, 9; "The Horrors of Reconstruction," News and Observer (Raleigh, N.C.), October 16, 1908; The Fifty Years Between 1857 and 1907, and Beyond, an Address at the University of North Carolina, June 3, 1907, on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Graduation of the Class of 1857, 7, North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The commencement address was "reprinted as published" and widely distributed by the Asheville Citizen, the News and Observer (Raleigh, N.C.), and the Charlotte Observer. On Reconstruction, see also Response by Col. R. Bingham, at the Annual Banquet of the New York Southern Society, 10.

to join "the peerage of the courageous men" who had fought for the Confederacy and, after the war, defended the white race from beneath a Klansmen's hood.14

Bingham hewed closely to these themes. He argued that there was but one way to address the crisis posed by the "Race Question": white men of a "New North, New South, New East, and New West" must treat "the negro [as] a dead issue," set aside sectional antagonism, and forge a "NEW NATIONAL AMERICA." In this diagnosis, Black freedom was the disease, white nationalism, the cure.15

What future did this portend for Blacks, who made up a third of the South's population? Bingham addressed that question in a speech he delivered in Chapel Hill on University Day, October 12, 1905. Newspapers described the address as "strong and vigorous," and on the race issue, "pessimistic." Bingham pledged that he and like-minded white men would continue their efforts to educate and uplift "the negro, as long as he submits." But even so, the outcome was uncertain. In Bingham's estimation, it was as likely as not that Blacks would meet the same end as "the Celt and the Red man" – in a word, "extermination."16

Robert Bingham, who spoke from a seat of learning and addressed the world through the pages of the popular press, was no mere man of his times, nor were his words simply ugly and distasteful. On the public stage, he proclaimed the homicidal doctrine of white supremacy, and in the classrooms of his school, he planted its principles in the minds of successive generations of students who, in later life, put them into practice as jurists and lawmakers, teachers, preachers, and ordinary citizens. Bingham's racial fantasies gave legitimacy to the regime of Jim Crow and sentenced Blacks to abject poverty, sickness, illiteracy, and the ever-present threat of violent death – all accompanied by psychological trauma on an incalculable scale. Such teachings, and such a man, despite his deep fidelity to alma mater, deserve no place of honor at a university that pledges itself to light and learning, and to the betterment of all humankind.

On March 22, 2021, Emily Bingham (UNC, Ph.D. 2003) reiterated her request (first tendered on January 11, 2019) that the name of her great-great grandfather Robert Hall


16 "Bold and Thoughtful Speech of Col. Bingham," News and Observer (Raleigh, N.C.), October 13, 1905; "University Anniversary," Morning Post (Raleigh, N.C.), October 13, 1905; Bingham, "Ex-Slaveholder's View," 7. On the necessity of black submission, see also Response by Col. R. Bingham, at the Annual Banquet of the New York Southern Society, 15. Bingham believed that through "earth-writing" at the time of creation, God had arranged mountains, oceans, and deserts to separate racial groups. Once that order had been violated, race war and the ascendancy of Anglo-Saxons was inevitable. See Bingham, reprint, The New South, 5-6; Response by Col. R. Bingham, at the Annual Banquet of the New York Southern Society in the Waldorf Astoria, December 14, 1904, to the Toast, The Status of the South in the Past; the Decadence of that Status; Its Restoration (Asheville, N.C.: Pen and Plate Club, 1905), 6-11.
Bingham be removed from Bingham Hall. Her petition was endorsed by nine of Bingham's other great and great-great grandchildren. See Appendix. The Commission on History, Race, and a Way Forward endorses these requests.

UNC Commission on History, Race, and a Way Forward
Appendix

1074 Cherokee Road * Louisville, KY 40204

Kevin Guskieiwicz, Chancellor
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
103 South Building
Campus Box 9100
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-9100

March 22, 2021

Dear Chancellor Guskieiwicz,

Today I renew the request that the University reconsider and remove my family’s name from Bingham Hall. The research conducted over the past year by the Commission on History, Race, and a Way Forward has only added to my and my family members’ sense that this is a right and just and healing way forward. Robert Hall Bingham was a talented man. Chapel Hill nurtured his talents as a youth. He tried to guide and enrich his alma mater. Yet, he was also a monstrously racist educator who played an active role in turning young minds and international opinion to this ideology. This, as well as his early affiliation with the Klan (or similar organization) in central North Carolina are abhorrent to us. The removal of his name will not take away the damage done but we hope it shows that we fully recognize it and regret it with our whole hearts.

Thank you for submitting this dossier to the trustees and helping to guide the school I love on a path of transparency, healing, and restorative embrace of human dignity. We look forward to hearing about the progress on this vital work.

Sincerely,

Emily Bingham
emily@emilybingham.net

Concurring Family Members (great and great-great grandchildren of Robert Hall Bingham)
- Sallie Bingham, Santa Fe, NM
- Eleanor Bingham Miller, Goshen, KY
- Barry Ellsworth, Santa Fe, NM
- Clara Bingham, New York, NY
- Christopher Iovenko, Los Angeles, CA
- Molly Bingham, Washington, DC
- Rowlindo Miller, Brooklyn, NY
- Worth Miller, Prospect, KY
- Hannah Miller, Louisville, KY
August 13, 2020

Dear Chancellor Guskiewicz,

As a US historian, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill graduate (Ph.D., 2003), donor, and descendant, I write to to bring to your attention the fact that Robert Hall Bingham 1838-1927, UNC class of 1857 participated in Ku Klux Klan activities. Bingham Hall, on Polk Place near Wilson Library, was dedicated in his honor and currently houses the Department of Communication.

I came across this information while researching my book on Robert Bingham’s granddaughter, *Irrepressible: The Jazz-Age Life of Henrietta Bingham* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015). It disturbed me personally, and in late 2018, I brought the matter to the attention of university officials. I believe you and I also discussed and the need to remove the Confederate monument on campus when we met in Louisville, Kentucky during your deanship. I then supplied the information to Chancellor Carol Folt and a number of trustees in early 2019. Here is what I sent her:

*Robert Hall Bingham returned from Confederate Civil War service to lead his family’s boarding school for boys in Mebane, Alamance County, west of Chapel Hill. The academy was a feeder for the University. More on his life is online from the Dictionary of North Carolina Biography (see link below). Wilson Library holds his Civil War diary and a number of Bingham School records. A supporter of public education at all levels, including (segregated) schools for and teacher colleges for Black North Carolinians. Bingham also advocated for the University—and apparently played a key role in creating the Kenan professorships (see references below for Bingham correspondence with UNC Chancellor E. K. Graham). Bingham Hall was named in 1929, two years after he died and following a monetary gift from his son, Robert Worth Bingham (1871-1937).*

The extent of Robert Hall Bingham’s Klan involvement is unlikely ever to be fully determined. [In 2020 with the Commission on Race, History and a Way Forward, there is a pat to documenting Bingham’s life and record on racial matters.] In his biography of my great-grandfather, historian William E. Ellis treats this period in the Bingham family history. *Proceedings of the impeachment of Reconstruction Era Republican governor William Holden contain references to activities by Bingham and his brother, William. A
1937 letter from his son (my great grandfather) to Gone with the Wind author Margaret Mitchell described the younger Robert Bingham’s earliest childhood memory—of being frightened when a figure appeared at their door dressed in the white sheets of the Ku Klux Klan. Relief flooded they young child when the menacing shape lifted the hood and revealed himself as his father.

A reconsideration of Bingham Hall’s status is critical to the integrity of the University that provided my superior history education. This was clear in the wake of the tragedy in Charlottesville, Virginia. It remained of great concern to me during the crisis surrounding Silent Sam. It is only more critical in 2020 as the country confronting embedded sources of racism and inequity. I know you and the Trustees you report to are dedicated to creating a welcoming environment to students. The respect young people have been brought up to expect from one another and to see exemplified in leading institutions like UNC is within reach of your administration.

The action by UNC Chapel Hill’s trustees to lift a repressive moratorium on renaming or removing campus structures signals that the governing body is taking seriously cries that have too long been ignored. Monuments and honored spaces send potent messages—silent to some and almost deafening to others. The school recontextualized the Kenan Memorial Stadium. It has struggled through an extremely problematic transfer of a Jim Crow era Confederate memorial to a neo-Confederate organization, with attendant legal and reputational costs.

Empowering a Commission to (among other charges) examine the landscape and history of white supremacy on campus has aided Trustees’ ability to take steps this summer to, as one member expressed it, “reconcile with [UNC-Chapel Hill’s] racialized footprint.” With transparency, collaboration, accountability, and courage, the Commission on History, Race, and a Way Forward has made the removal of a handful of names possible. Bingham Hall remains on the long list of known problems to be addressed. Additionally, as an educator and scholar I want to emphasize the vital roles undergraduate and graduate students have played and must play in these processes. A thorough and inclusive and energetic course of action under your leadership as Chancellor will go far to restore collective faith in the University’s mission of educating a diverse generation North Carolina leaders.

Robert Hall Bingham’s connection to racial violence and clearly goes against the values and mission of the University. Given this troubled history, which I have sought to bring to the school’s attention, I hope that you will submit Bingham Hall to thorough review by the appropriate committee and then by the Trustees. I respectfully request to be informed of progress on this matter. My care for UNC and my extended family’s sense of duty to history are entwined with the decision process. Members of your development team know I am open to assist in covering costs related to researching Bingham’s record so that the University can make an informed determination.

We are living through a critical transition in our history. We are called to look clearly at the damage done by people in the service of a racist culture. It takes time—I did not see this situation the same way in 2017 as I see it now. It is a collective responsibility, borne too long by those most damaged by that culture rather not those, like me and my family (and many UNC
trustees over the years) who have benefited from it. Far from erasing history, we are engaging in ongoing learning. We are invoking the past’s complex, fascinating, inspiring, and sobering realities. We have already waited too long. Thank you for your courage. I look forward to hearing from you.

With my best wishes for your success,

Emily Bingham
emily@emilybingham.net
502-905-8859

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- William E. Ellis, Robert Worth Bingham and the Southern Mystique: From the Old South to the New South and Beyond (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1997), Chapter 1.
- Robert Hall Bingham to E. K. Graham, October 6, 1915 and und. [c. 1917], Chancellor’s Records, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Cc

- Robert J. Parker, Senior Associate Dean for Development and Executive Director, UNC Arts and Sciences Foundation
- James Leloudis, Professor of History and Peter T. Grauer Associate Dean for Honors Carolina, Co-Chair Commission on History, Race, and a Way Forward
- Patricia Parker, Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Communication, Co-Chair Commission on History, Race, and a Way Forward
January 11, 2019

Dear Chancellor Folt,

As a historian, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill graduate (Ph.D., 2003), donor, and descendant, I write to bring to your attention the fact that Robert Hall Bingham (1838-1927, UNC class of 1857) participated in Ku Klux Klan activities. Bingham Hall, on Polk Place near Wilson Library, was dedicated in his honor and currently houses the Department of Communications.

I came across this information while researching my book on Robert Bingham’s granddaughter, *Irrepressible: The Jazz-Age Life of Henrietta Bingham* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015). Robert Hall Bingham returned from Confederate Civil War service to lead his family’s boarding school for boys in Mebane, Alamance County, west of Chapel Hill. The academy was an important feeder for the University. More on his life is online from the *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* (see link below). Wilson Library holds his Civil War diary and a number of Bingham School records. A vigorous supporter of public education at all levels, including (segregated) schools for African-Americans and teacher colleges, Bingham also advocated energetically for the University—proposing to Mary Lily Kenan Flagler that she boost the university by funding special Kenan professorships (see references below for Bingham correspondence with UNC Chancellor E. K. Graham). Bingham Hall was named in 1929 following a gift his son, Robert Worth Bingham (1871-1937).

The extent of Robert Hall Bingham’s Klan involvement is unlikely ever to be fully determined. Historian William E. Ellis treats this period in the Bingham family history, and proceedings of the impeachment of Reconstruction Era Republican governor William Holden contain references to activities by Bingham and his brother, William. A 1937 letter from his son to *Gone with the Wind* author Margaret Mitchell described the younger Robert’s earliest childhood memory—of being frightened when a figure came to the family door dressed in the white sheets of the Ku Klux Klan. Relief flooded him when the menacing form lifted his hood and revealed himself as his father.
I believe that your administration must consider the status of Bingham Hall. I understand that UNC, Chapel Hill’s trustees imposed a “moratorium” on renaming or removing campus structures, but there has been the removal of Silent Sam and the recontextualization of the Kenan Memorial Stadium in response to information about William Rand Kenan, Sr.’s involvement in the Wilmington Massacre. Clearly, the trustees have reconsidered their mandate.

I and other Bingham family members are deeply uncomfortable with Robert Hall Bingham’s connection to racial violence. Given this troubled history, which I have no doubt is bound at some point to become better known, I see several possible paths:

- At the very least an official acknowledgment of KKK involvement in Bingham Hall via exhibit, plaque, or some other intervention
- Joining the building’s name with the name of another figure who had a deep impact on education in North Carolina such as Charlotte Hawkins Brown—this would require new interpretive explanation about Bingham and the newly honored individual and the history of the alteration
- Renaming

While I don’t wish to personally involve myself in the University’s decision beyond advocating for analysis and serious reconsideration, I would appreciate being informed of steps taken to evaluate Bingham Hall’s name and any proposed action. I believe that historical and community consultation is essential to a successful outcome and would not favor any process that did not engage professional scholars and the Carolina student body. Finally, I am open to discussing ways to assist in managing the cost of studying and reinterpreting or replacing the Bingham name on the building.

We are living through a critical transition in our history and are called to look clearly at the damage done by people in the service of a racist culture. This is a collective responsibility, one that for too long has been borne by those most damaged by that culture, not those who have benefited from it. Far from erasing history, we are engaging in ongoing learning. We are invoking the past’s complex, fascinating, inspiring, and sobering realities. We have already waited too long. I look forward to hearing from you.

Most Sincerely,

Emily Bingham
emily@emilybingham.net
502-905-8859
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Robert Hall Bingham to E. K. Graham, October 6, 1915 and und. [c. 1917], Chancellor’s Records, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.


Cc

Robert J. Parker, Senior Associate Dean and Executive Director, UNC Arts and Sciences Foundation

James Leloudis, Professor of History and Peter T. Grauer Associate Dean for Honors Carolina, Co-Chair Chancellor’s Task Force on UNC-Chapel Hill History

Charles G. Duckett, Vice Chair, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Board of Trustees

W. Lowery Caudill, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Trustee